

NOTHING TO FEAR BUT FEAR ITSELF

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Since we gathered here last week, the United States and its allies have been bombing Afghanistan, and the FBI has put law enforcement agencies on highest alert, warning of further terrorist attacks on American soil within a matter of days.¹ Osama bin Laden has spoken: "There is America, full of fear from its north to its south, from its west to its east. Thank God for that."²

Are we full of fear? Is bin Laden right? I know a number of people who are afraid to fly now, and the airline industry has experienced a huge downturn in business, with a ripple effect across many other industries. Anthrax incidents are increasing and Internet pharmacies are selling thousands of antibiotic prescriptions to worried customers.³ A letter to a local newspaper explains, "One of the most frightening visions of a threatened people is a deserted street, with fearful faces peering out from behind closed curtains. Since September 11, I see that vision playing out in my own community."⁴ Terms like "post-traumatic stress syndrome," are surfacing on the lips of my friends and colleagues. Students on this campus are worried about the draft being reinstated and about the risk of dying in the mountains of Central Asia. Is bin Laden right? Is "America full of fear?"

There have been other times when the United States of America was facing large dangers, and our leaders counseled us about our emotions. For example, in the midst of the great Depression of the nineteen-thirties, Franklin Roosevelt in his first inaugural address spoke of being in the midst of a "national emergency" where "the withered leaves of industrial enterprise lie on every side; farmers find no markets for their produce; the savings of many years in thousands of families are gone." He identified a "nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance." And it was in this speech that he uttered his famous words, "Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself."⁵

Winston Churchill likewise called his nation from fear to courage when it was passing through "a dark and deadly valley" in the early years of World War II, when Hitler's Third Reich was bombing London every night. "Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, 'This was their finest hour.'"⁶ During a year of bombardment and untold suffering, Churchill tirelessly visited victims of the blitz and showed up at scenes of bomb damage, smoking his cigar and giving his V sign.⁷ At the lowest point, he said, "Never give in -- never, never, never, never, in nothing great or small, large or petty, never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense."⁸

These words and tireless action may also describe what New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani has been doing over the last month. On September 11, as he seemed to be everywhere important in the city and spoke publicly at least half a dozen times. As the New Yorker put it, “he managed to convey at once grief and resolve, and his presence offered the kind of reassurance”⁹ that the city so desperately needed. Mayor Giuliani himself explained, “Hatred, prejudice and anger are what caused this terrible tragedy, and the people off the city of New York should act differently. We should act bravely. We should act in a tolerant way. We should go about our business, and we should show these people that they can’t stop us.”¹⁰

When President Bush spoke to a joint session of Congress on September 20, he said, “These terrorists kill not merely to end lives, but to disrupt and end a way of life. With every atrocity, they hope that America grows fearful, retreating from the world and forsaking our friends.” The president admitted that the terrorists have had some success: “I know many citizens have fears tonight.” Yet he went on to ask that Americans “be calm and resolute, even in the face of a continuing threat.” He looked America in the eye and said: “I ask you to live your lives and hug your children...I ask your continued participation and confidence in the American economy.” He tried to embolden the country as he exclaimed, “Some speak of an age of terror. I know there are struggles ahead and dangers to face. But this country will define our times, not be defined by them. Freedom and fear are at war...We will rally the world to this cause by our efforts, by our courage. We will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail.”¹¹

Brave words from our political leaders. Yet Osama bin Laden sees something quite different: “There is America, full of fear from its north to its south, from its west to its east. Thank God for that.” Is bin Laden right? Are we full of fear? And what does God have to do with this? Better put, what’s the religious perspective on this, beyond the blasphemous claim that God willed this heinous sacrifice of innocent lives—blasphemous just as much in Islam as in the other great religions of the world? This is a Christian service here today. What’s the Christian perspective on fear?

In the gospel reading from Luke,¹² Jesus and his disciples are caught in a huge, violent storm crossing a lake. As their boat began to fill with water, the disciples were filled with fear. By contrast, Jesus was actually sleeping through the storm. He woke up only as they shouted at him, “Master, Master, we are perishing.” His immediate response was to be calming—literally. He spoke to the wind and the waves and they ceased. Now his disciples were frightened in another sense. They were in awe: “Who then is this, that her commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?” Jesus’ question to them was simple: “Where is your faith?”

It’s too easy, though, to see the calming of the storm simply as a miracle and to see Jesus as promising that faith in God will eliminate suffering, even unto death. Instead, I would submit that Jesus is asking us to face our fears directly, find sources of courage as we do so, which primarily lie in love, and to have faith that the universe is ultimately trustworthy in that love is the final word, come life or come death. As the Apostle John says, “God is love.”¹³ Or as the Apostle Paul says in his letter to the Romans, “I am

convinced that neither death nor life...nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God....”¹⁴ Remember all those cell phone calls from people who knew they were going to die on September 11: So many sounded like love letters: “Hey Jules. It’s Brian. I’m on a plane that’s been hijacked. It doesn’t look good. I just want to tell you how much I love you.” Or another call: “We have been hijacked. They are being kind. I love you.”¹⁵

So, in the story, Jesus looks directly into the eye of the storm with courage, responds out of love for his panicked disciples, and acts as he is called and empowered by a loving God to act. Easy for Jesus, you many say, but not so easy for us.

The second gospel reading from Matthew,¹⁶ though, deepens the texture and the meaning of how a Christian is to overcome fear. Here Jesus is praying in the garden of Gethsemane the night before he is to die a terrible, painful death on the cross. This time he’s not sleeping through a storm. In fact, the text tells us that he knows he’s going to die and that at first he’s deeply grieved and agitated. He throws himself on the ground and prays, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” He doesn’t want to die, and certainly not in the tortured way it’s going to happen.

In the process of praying, though, he ends up facing his fears directly: “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” He finds courage – it seems partly by being with his friends, partly by power of will, and partly by trusting his life and death to God. For as he ultimately says to God in his prayer, “not what I want, but what you want.” His love is intense: his love for his friends, even as they are falling asleep, rather than being with him, and are soon to deny him and abandon him. Likewise his love of God – his “Father who art in heaven...they will be done” – is intense.

Ultimately the Christian story is one of resurrection and eternal life. The final word is God’s, but that doesn’t necessarily mean freedom from suffering and violence. Jesus taught us to pray to be delivered from evil, to be saved from the time of trial, but as we see in his case and that of many innocents and martyrs throughout history, that is not necessarily to be. What is to be, though, both on earth and in heaven, is love: for and from our friends, partners, families and countless others known or unknown. Over all is the love of God, which the world can neither give nor take away. The ultimate truth is that we are embraced and held in life and in death by loving arms, by the power of love itself, which is God.

Now this may all be getting too theologically abstract and unconvincing, so let me try to make it more concrete through the example and words of a near-contemporary, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. As you know, Dr. King dedicated himself to a life of nonviolence. This was an activist nonviolence of course, not passivity. He was a major leader of the American civil right movement and a major critic of America’s war in Vietnam. He spent a lot of time in jail, and again and again he put his life on the line, risking his family’s lives along with his own. He was killed for his efforts before he reached the age of forty. How did he deal with his fears?

It's haunting to re-read the last sermon he delivered, on the night before his assassination in April of 1968. It's his own Gethsemane words. In support of Memphis sanitation workers, he said, "We're going to march again, and we've got to march again." He called on his listeners to have a dangerous unselfishness like the good Samaritan had on the road to Jericho. Those who didn't stop to help the bloodied man who fell among thieves, King explained, were probably afraid. As one who had visited the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, King described it as a winding, meandering road through mountainous terrain conducive to ambushes. It came to be known as the "Bloody pass" in the days of Jesus. King spoke of how the pilot on his flight from Atlanta to Memphis that morning had said over the public address system. "We're sorry for the delay, but we have Dr. Martin Luther King on the plane. And to be sure that all of the bags were checked, and to be sure that nothing would be wrong with the plane, we had to check out everything carefully. And we've had the plane protected and guarded all night."

King continued, "And then I got into Memphis. And some began to...talk about the treats that were out. What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers?" How did King face his fears? He explained, "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will...I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."¹⁷

Years earlier King had expanded on his approach in a sermon entitled "antidotes For Fear."¹⁸ First he spoke of the positive sides of fear: "Fear is the elemental alarm system of the human organism which warns of approaching dangers... Fear, moreover is a powerfully creative force. Every great invention and intellectual advance represents a desire to escape from some dreaded circumstance or condition." King gives examples like the fear of pain leading to marvelous advances in medical science. Then he goes on to say that normal fear protects us, while abnormal fear paralyzes us. "Our problem is not to be rid of fear, but rather to harness and master it."¹⁹

But how? King counsels four things: "First, we must unflinchingly face our fears and honestly ask ourselves why we are afraid." Second, we must nurture the classical virtue of courage, the power of the mind to overcome fear. Third, "Fear is mastered through love. The New Testament affirms, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casteth out fear." Fourth, "Fear is mastered through faith...[which] assures us that the universe is trustworthy and that God is concerned."²⁰

By looking squarely and honestly at fears, King explains, we gain a degree of power and control. We're then able to separate fears grounded in present reality from those which are imaginary or unlikely to be realized. Ignoring or repressing fears also leads to increasing inner conflicts rather than quelling them. Then, in describing courage, King quotes the Stoic philosopher Epictetus as having said almost two thousand years before Roosevelt that "It is not death or hardship that is a fearful thing, but the fear of hardship and death." King goes on to say that courageous people "Never lose the zest for living, even though their life situation is zestless" Cowardly inner resolution to go forward in

spite of obstacles and frightening situations; cowardice is a submissive surrender to circumstance.”²¹

In describing the Christian concept of love, King insists that "The kind of love which led Christ to a cross and kept Paul unembittered amid the angry torrents of persecution is not soft, anemic and sentimental." Instead, "Such love confronts evil without flinching and shows in our popular parlance an infinite capability 'to take it.' Such love overcomes the world even from a roughhewn cross against the skyline." In words which are prophetic for today, Rev. King speaks of a deteriorating international situation which is "shot through with the lethal darts of fear." That fear is not just of violent aggression, as he explains, but also of "scientific and technological supremacy, economic power, and our own loss of status and power." Hate is rooted in this kind of fear, and "the only cure for fear-hate is love." "We say that war is a consequence of hate, but close scrutiny reveals this sequence: first fear, then! hate, then war, and finally deeper hatred." From King's perspective, building armaments will not cast out fear, but instead produce greater fear: "Not arms, but [only] love, understanding, and organized goodwill can cast out fear."²²

Finally, King speaks of mastering fear through faith. He explains that "A positive religious faith does not offer an illusion that we shall be exempt from pain and suffering, nor does it imbue us with the idea that life is a drama of unalloyed comfort and untroubled ease. Rather, it instills us with the inner equilibrium needed to face strains, burdens, and fears that inevitably come, and assures us that the world is trustworthy and that God is concerned." King reminds us that death is inevitable, and its just a matter of time and place. "It is a democracy for all of the people, not an aristocracy for some of the people...We need not fear it...Death is not the ultimate evil; the ultimate evil is to be outside God's love."²³

Is America today full of fear from its north to its south, from its west to its east? I hope not. May we face the fears we do have squarely and honestly, work hard to develop the virtue of courage in small everyday ways (which will fortify us for the major moments we need it), practice love to cast out fear, and celebrate that in the end our lives and our deaths are in the hands of a loving God.

¹ Lenny Savino and Kevin Murphy, "FBI Issues Warning of Potential New Attack," San Jose Mercury News, October 12, 2001, p. 1A.

² Osama bin Laden, translation of taped remarks aired on the Al-Jazeera television network on October 7, 2001 (San Jose Mercury, October 8, 2001, p. 16A).

³ Barbara Feder and Julie Sevrens Lyons, "Web Demand for Anthrax Antibiotic Causes Worry," San Jose Mercury News, October 12, 2001, p. 1A.

⁴ Barbara Backer, Letter to the editor of the San Jose Mercury News, September 21, p. 21A.

⁵ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "First Inaugural Address," March 4, 1933 (Franklin D. Roosevelt Library & Digital Archives, www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu).

⁶ Winston Churchill, Speech to the House of Commons, June 18, 1940 (www.winstonchurchill.org).

⁷ Herbert G. Nicholas, "Sir Winston Churchill," Encyclopedia Britannica, 1978, Vol. 4, p. 598.

⁸ Winston Churchill, Speech to students at the Harrow School, October 29, 1941 (www.winstonchurchill.org).

⁹ Elizabeth Kolbert, “In Charge: The Best of Rudy Giuliani,” The New Yorker, September 24, 2001, p. 40.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ President George W. Bush, Speech to a Joint Session of Congress, September 20, 2001 (San Jose Mercury News, September 21, 2001, p. 21A).

¹² Luke 8: 22-25.

¹³ I John 4: 8.

¹⁴ Romans 8: 38-39.

¹⁵ Amanda Ripley, “The Last Phone Call,” Time, September 24, 2001, p. 73.

¹⁶ Matthew 26: 36-41.

¹⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., “I See the Promised Land,” a sermon delivered at the Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee on April 3, 1968 (as collected in James Melvin Washington (ed.), A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr., San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986, p. 286).

¹⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Antidotes to Fear,” collected as Chapter 14 in The Strength to Love (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 511.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 511-515.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 511-513.

²² Ibid., p. 513.

²³ Ibid., pp. 515-516.